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## The myth of hunger during the reign of Nicholas II

Posted on [April 27, 2020](#) by [Paul Gilbert](#)



For many years, Soviet historiography was dominated by the notion of “eternal” famine in Imperial Russia. With this lie, the Bolsheviks tried to justify the monstrous famines of the 1920s, 30s and 40s, as well as the constant shortage of food during the Soviet years.

In fact, there were many poor harvests leading to food shortages in Russia before 1912. The largest of them was in 1891, during the reign of Emperor Alexander III (1845-1894). This was the result of a global agrarian crisis in the 1880s, which also affected England, France, Germany, and parts of the United States. The terrible famine in Ireland between 1845-1850, claimed the lives of 1.5 million people. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the consequences of this famine reduced the Irish population by more than 30%.

The crop failure of 1891-92, was caused by severe drought. It affected 25 provinces in the Russian Empire. Between 1891-92, some 30 million people were starving. In 1897, another crop failure in 18 provinces was again caused by drought, worsened by an unfavorable winter, and an invasion of insect pests. Between 1897-98, 27 million people were starving.

In the summer of 1905, there was a subsidence in the Chernozem, Volga, Trans-Volga, and eastern provinces. The crop failures mainly affected traditionally agricultural areas, which, according to official data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, occupied up to 43% of all arable land in Russia. The last “royal” crop failure occurred in 1911 – it was a reflection of a serious pan-European crop failure due to drought. The crop failure covered a vast territory: all the districts of the Astrakhan, Orenburg, Samara, Saratov, Simbirsk and Ufa provinces, as well as many districts of the Vyatka, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Penza, Perm provinces and the Don Army Region, affecting more than 20 million people in one way or another. In the affected areas, only 1/3 of the grain harvest was harvested against the annual average.

However, it should be noted that crop failures and malnutrition in Imperial Russia did not lead to mass mortality. All the Bolshevik allegations that up to 4 million people a year allegedly starved to death in Russia are an outright lie, which is based on false “annual reports of the College of the Life Chancellery.” It is worth noting that such a body did not even exist in the Russian Empire.



Minister of Agriculture and State Property Aleksei Sergeevich Ermolov (1847-1917)

Between 1892-1905, Minister of Agriculture and State Property Aleksei Sergeevich Ermolov (1847-1917), then the head of the Central Committee for the provision of medical and food assistance to the population, wrote that “not a single death from starvation, or from the complete absence of any food, not to mention the cases of suicides or murders of children due to hunger, were not recorded anywhere.” Ermolov noted that the population growth in 1906-07 in some provinces (Oryol, Tambov, Ufa) surpassed that of the previous year.

There is no data on deaths due to starvation among Soviet and Russian demographers. In his studies, Russian demographer Adolf Grigorievich Rashin (1888-1960) argued that in the period from 1890-1913 mortality steadily decreased: from 36.7 deaths per 1000 population in 1890 to 27.4 per 1000 population in 1913.

The multi volume work *Население России в XX веке* (*The Population of Russia in the 20th Century*) unequivocally states that “by 1913 all regions of European Russia reported a significant increase in population”. The Chernozem region and the Volga region, experienced one of the highest rates of population growth in the Empire.

In 1907 a very high natural population growth was recorded (18.1%), 1911 (17%) and 1912 (16.9%). The lowest increase in the first 15 years of the twentieth century was recorded during the troubled year of 1905 (13.9%).

During the alleged “great famine” of 1911-1912, the population grew by more than 3 million people. You can compare this to data on the years of the Soviet famines (1921-22, 1931-33, 1946-48): which resulted in complete cessation of the country’s population growth, and a sharp decline in life expectancy.



Hundreds of corpses piled up at the local cemetery, during the 1921 Famine in Russia

Thus, the only conclusion that can be made: after the famine of 1891-92, which was accompanied by an acute epidemic of cholera, the Russian Empire did not entail any “starvation deaths”.

It should be noted that the Imperial Government made great effort to combat the effects of crop failures.

In 1897, loans amounting to 5.4 million rubles were granted from the All-Empire capital, in 1898 – 35.2 million (34.4 million poods were purchased for the foodstuffs of the population – bread, and support of cattle breeding by peasants), public works were organized, in particular, the transportation by peasants of grain purchased by the government to provide bread for the hungry.

The death of horses caused by the lack of fodder was compensated by the purchase of horses from the steppe inhabitants of the local breeds and their delivery on favorable terms by the beginning of field work. The supply of feed to needy households was carried out on a “loan basis” (with payment over 3-5 years), in 1898 7 million rubles were spent on these needs.

In the canteens opened by the Red Cross, up to 1.5 million people were fed, mainly women, children, old people and the weak, but in exceptional cases, able-bodied men (in the absence of earnings), more than 2 million received rations.



Canteen to feed the hungry in Nizhni Novgorod province, during the famine of 1891-1892

The Guardianship of Diligence and Workers' Houses, created at the initiative of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, began to take effect. Among the private philanthropists, the Bessarabian landowner Purishkevich was especially distinguished – thanks to his ebullient activity, some 20 canteens were opened, financed with donations and thereby saving hundreds of people from starvation. His efforts were noticed and greatly appreciated in St. Petersburg.

Everywhere where hunger arose, food centers were opened for children, women, and those incapable of work, each of which fed up to 1000 people.

According to observers, “the food campaign of 1906-1907. was carried out by the Food Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs with much success.

At the same time, charitable organizations actively supported the hungry. One branch of the Red Cross, with the assistance of local authorities, opened free canteens and food outlets, which issued 270 million meals and rations during the famine. The Holy Synod introduced a gathering for the hungry on all Sundays and twelve feasts.

Private charity played an increasingly significant role. Numerous private trusteeships, local societies, unions, and committees were established. The assistance offered by “private owners” turned out to be of great help to the state, whose stocks were greatly depleted as early as 1905.

For the supply of feed during the crop failure of 1911-12, the government spent 9-12 million rubles, issued loans for food (for example, in Siberia they issued 300 rubles per cow allowance), 16 thousand horses were distributed on favorable terms. Public work for peasants as an experiment decided this time to make the main form of assistance. 42 million rubles were allocated for their implementation, with 84% of the amount spent on wages. The hungry were provided with 222 million meals, under the guidance of priests and teachers in the Volga region alone, more than 7 thousand canteens were opened in schools, where 24 million lunches were provided to children. In general, the campaign was carried out at on a gargantuan level – and it is interesting to note that the state, who were in full control over the situation in both 1901 and 1911, managed to prevent starvation.

Thus, it can be seen that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the state had formed an integrated system of redistribution of food resources, which functioned effectively during periods of crop failure and with the depletion of bread in peasant farms. In addition, measures were constantly taken to support residents of the territories affected by crop failure. The Russian public actively participated in helping the victims, which caused widespread development of charity, and the formation of effective structures for providing assistance to the population. After 1892, deaths from starvation were avoided even under the most unfavorable conditions (such as the “revolutionary situation” of the mid-1900s).

Source: Petr Multatuli

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